

# Historical and Theological Perspectives

Christians believe that ultimately all ministry derives from God, who spoke through prophets and priests in Israel and was present in Christ, the one "high priest," who offered his sacrifice "once for all when he offered up himself" (Hebrews 7:26f). Jesus indicated that this servant ministry was expected of his followers when the disciples asked him who among them was to be regarded as greatest. He observed, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greatest, the one who sits at table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22: 25-27).

Paul indicated that servanthood not only was to be the style of leadership in the Christian community, but the shape of life for the whole community (Philippians 2). With servanthood as the mark of ministry, different kinds of ministry arose within the Christian community. In I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, Paul describes varieties of gifts and service and indicates the need for them all.

As the young church grew, leadership needs became clearer. By the time of the pastoral epistles there are indications of the offices of bishop, elder and deacon. These were not sharply defined as yet, but clearly the need for pastoral care, for the teaching of "sound doctrine," for leadership in worship and in the stewardship of shared resources, was being met by authorizing certain persons to function in specific roles. Yet nowhere is there a notion that these officers were *the* ministers; rather the Church is defined as the ministering "body," the "royal priesthood." Persons in leadership roles were called by the Holy Spirit, equipped through a discipline of living out the faith, and accepted by the community as fulfilling important functions in the working out of its ministry.

The development of emerging orders of clergy — in both East and West — was complex. By the sixteenth century, the clergy had become the ruling class in the Church and in parts of society. For all practical purposes they were considered to be the Church. The liturgy, which means literally "the work of the people," had moved away from the people physically, in the sanctuary, as well as theologically and linguistically. It became unnecessary even to have a congregation in order to celebrate the liturgy.

Reformation protests in various ways reshaped church life and the place of the ordained ministry in it. Luther's call for the "priesthood of all believers" not only led to the abolition of privately said masses but in principle, if not always in fact, restored the priesthood to the whole body of Christ. It indicated that the laity have a place in church government. While Luther provided for such authority to be shared mainly with lay princes, other parts of the Reformation, including those strains most directly informing our own church, went much further.

While Lutheran influences have their place in the United Church of Christ through its Evangelical forebears, the greatest stamp on its understanding of church

government and ministry came through the efforts of Zwingli; later, and even more formatively, from Calvin; and from the Independents of Britain and Holland. Calvin, for instance, insisted that the Church is a covenant community, a commonwealth with an exemplary role to play in relation to the secular order. This had social as well as theological consequences, leading not only to lay participation in the government of the Church, but to a strong sense of lay ministry in the worlds of work, politics, education and family life.

For most of the Reformers, the "power of the keys" — that is, the means of grace for salvation — belonged to the entire body of believers. Yet they maintained that the exercise of this power was to be delegated to those called by God to be pastors and teachers. Through their calling and their being authorized by the Church, they exercised the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The Reformers' insistence upon the Word's being *rightly* preached and the sacraments being *duly* administered led to the demand for an educated clergy. The Reformers believed that in order to overcome ignorance of the faith and superstition in regard to religious matters, the Church must insist on clarity of preaching and teaching about the gospel. Thus there is a strong emphasis in all of our traditions on the ordained minister as teacher as well as pastor.

To understand ministry today one needs to remember this Reformation sense of the priesthood of all believers, the ecclesiological insistence upon authority as residing in the whole Church, and the strong sense of the need for an educated ministry called by the Holy Spirit and learned in the faith. Transmitted through the English Reformation, these traditions initially arrived on the American continent in the persons of the Puritan forebears of Congregationalism in New England. There a strong sense of discipline underlay the conviction that the Church was composed of a covenanted community of regenerate people, the so-called "visible saints." In their ecclesiology, as it developed, the congregation became the locus of authority and the ordaining body. There was, of course, fellowship among the congregations in the form of associations (and consociations). Yet this congregational authority was always tempered by two factors: the insistence upon a ministry *called* by the Holy Spirit, as discerned by the community of faith, and an emphasis upon an educated ministry. It was the latter emphasis which soon led to the formation of colleges and seminaries to provide proper training for people to serve both church and state.

Reformed ancestors among the German-speaking immigrants in Pennsylvania in the early eighteenth century brought with them a different strand of the Calvinistic heritage. Without ordained clergy in this country they called pastors from among themselves. But they, too, had a strong sense of the need for educated and ordained ministers. Their sense of continuity led them to seek authority to ordain from the Dutch Reformed Church in Amsterdam which was granted. Clergy continued to come through the Dutch Church until the German Reformed Church wrote its own constitution in

1792. While the German Reformed Church had no colleges or seminaries at this time, it continued to educate ministers through seminaries in parsonages, where individual ordained ministers trained young men for the ministry. This then led to the formation of a "one-man seminary" in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1825, which developed by 1837 into Mercersburg Seminary.

The immigration of Evangelical Church people in the nineteenth century led to an early ecumenical experience. Coming from the Prussian Union of Frederick III in 1817, the "Evangelicals" included people with both Lutheran and Reformed backgrounds. Many settled in Missouri, and it was there that the Basel Mission sent ordained ministers to serve. Missionaries also came from the Barmen Mission, and a number of churches were developed. By 1840 this led to the formation of the "German Evangelical Church Society of the West." Within two years they, too, had formed a seminary, which in 1883 finally located in St. Louis.

While three of the denominations comprising the United Church of Christ resulted from developments in Europe, the fourth emerged within America during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Certain Methodists in North Carolina and Virginia, some Presbyterians in Kentucky, and a few Baptists in New England became dissatisfied with what they considered to be autocratic church structures or rigid ecclesiastical practices. All three groups deplored sectarian names and decided to identify themselves by the name "Christian." Rejecting human creeds, they urged that the Bible alone was a sufficient rule of faith and practice. True piety, they also contended, should be the only test of Christian fellowship or of church membership. Furthermore, they adhered strongly to a congregational form of church government. For many years, these three groups of Christians remained independent of one another, but by the latter part of the nineteenth century they found themselves in sufficient agreement to form a general convention.

In June 1929 the Congregational Churches and the Christian Church merged to form the Congregational Christian Church. On June 26, 1934, the Evangelical Synod of North America merged with the Reformed Church in the United States to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Churches of the Evangelical and Reformed heritage placed strong emphasis on the central role played by clergy in the Church's ministry of Word and Sacrament. Their government, while "of the people," was presbyterial, leading to a strong sense of the interconnectedness of the Church. Thus candidates for the ministry were ordained only by ordained ministers. Furthermore, ordained ministers in this tradition held membership not in local churches but in synods.

Congregational Christian practice had placed the first emphasis upon the congregation. Ordination was at the call of, and by, the local congregation *with* the other churches in its Association. A strong sense of relationship, however, led to the acceptance of such ordination by all other churches in the "General Council of Congregational Christian Churches." Services of *installation* in a new congregation replaced what had earlier been *ordination to the ministry* of a new

congregation. Lay people in the Congregational Christian tradition have always had a part in the examination of, and voting on, candidates for ordination. In terms of their own principles they should also have had a part in the ordination process as well, but that was often not the practice.

At present the United Church of Christ recognizes that these strands in our heritage have been merged. While in theory there were differences prior to the merger in 1957, actual practice was quite similar. Now ministers are ordained by the Association (or Conference) within the local church. Ministerial standing is held in the Association, but ordained ministers are members of a congregation.

If this be the practice, what theology of church and ordination lies behind it? Here we need to go back to biblical principles. The ultimate ministry is of God, through Christ, our true "high priest." But the Church is a priestly people and the means of grace — Word and Sacrament — are celebrated in and by this priestly community. The ordained ministry arises out of and is in the service of this priestly, servant community.

The Church considers its clergy to be called by the Holy Spirit to serve it, so a sense of this calling is a prerequisite to ordination. Because of the primacy of the Word, the Church considers it necessary for its ordained ministry to be educated in theology. This has led to the strong emphasis in our traditions upon the formation of schools, colleges and seminaries as centers of such learning. Finally, the Church's representatives, lay and clergy, convened in Association meeting, determine whether a particular candidate's Christian experience, preparation and fitness are such that they wish to ordain him or her as a minister in the United Church of Christ.

According to the *United Church of Christ Constitution*, the ordained person is called to preach and teach, to administer the rites and sacraments of the Church, and to exercise pastoral care and community leadership. This combination of functions is what delineates the role of the ordained person. In the midst of much discussion of the ministry of the laity today, the particularity of the ordained minister's office often is unclear. In part this is because the ordained minister is no longer the only "learned" one in a congregation, or even the most learned. Furthermore, there may be lay people who can teach better than the clergy. There may be better speakers, counselors and administrators. The problem of identity for the ordained ministry, however, remains a problem only when one focuses on just one of the ministerial functions. The office of the ordained minister in the United Church of Christ is, rather, characterized by the particular *combination* of functions for which a pastor has basic responsibility before God and God's people. The Church has called certain of its members as ordained ministers to undertake responsibility for seeing that all these tasks are done, and while they may be delegated and shared, the pastor is still basically responsible for them.

All ministry is done under the Lordship of Christ and in response to the centrality of the Word of God. There is an ongoing tension in the life of the United Church of Christ as a result of the merging of two traditions: one which emphasizes the necessity of the ordained minister to provide an authoritative ministry of Word and Sacrament,

and one which emphasizes the congregational form of governance.

When pastor and people are both committed to a full-orbed ministry of preaching and teaching, administering the sacraments, pastoral care and administration, these tensions can usually be creative. Confrontation is complemented by caring, the truth is spoken in love, the sacraments offer grace, and church life and mission are administered with right order. In such circumstances both pastor and congregation are committed to the servant role of the Church given it by Christ. Depth of faith, rooted in confidence in the Holy Spirit, enables the community to speak and to act out the gospel in the contemporary world.

While the basic call to a person seeking to be ordained is to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, to becoming pastor and teacher, the Church needs numerous specialized ministries. Some are closely related to the Church as a community of faith: for instance, church-sponsored chaplaincies in various institutions, staff positions in various judicatories and denominational agencies, and seminary teaching. Here accountability to the community is included in the call; it is less clear and direct than in the parish, but it is there.

Other ordained people may be called to such work as social work, counseling, street ministries, journalism, and radio or television production. Many of these tasks can be performed quite as well by lay people. When ordained ministers are called to them, however, they need to do so in relationship with a specific community of faith. Their basic calling *is* to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, preaching and teaching and providing pastoral care. This basic calling can and should underlie the special ministry they undertake. Laity and clergy called to the same tasks each bring a different, though equally valid, calling and perspective.

To be an ordained minister is to have a calling to function in a leadership role *within* the Church; ordained ministry has no reality apart from its rootedness in the community of faith. The nature of the task of the ordained minister can be summed up in the Latin phrase, *servus servorum Dei*: a servant of the servants of God. To be the Church is to have a calling and a mission within and to the world; the community has no validity apart from this calling rooted in faith. The nature of the task of the Church can be summed up as *servus humanitas Dei*: the servant of God's humanity, being in and with all of God's creatures as their servants for Jesus' sake.